

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 10 February, 2002

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Time goes so quickly around here that you might not realize that LENT begins on this coming Wednesday.

It's time to think about what kind of LENT you'll have this year.

It's a serious time in the Church, a time of repentance, a time of deep thought about the kind of life that you and I are leading, a time to repeat one of the Psalms that is always associated with regret for one's sins...and to take it seriously:

Parts of it are as follows:

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness.
In your great tenderness, wipe away my faults.
Wash me of my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.

Instill some joy and gladness into me.
Let the bones you have crushed rejoice again.

Create a clean heart in me.
Put into me a new and constant spirit.

My sacrifice is this broken spirit of mine.
You will not scorn my crushed and broken heart.

Psalm 51

The whole psalm is worth reading - again and again - during LENT.
May your LENT this year be the best of your life.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

ASH WEDNESDAY

This coming Wednesday (13th) is the beginning of Lent. It's ASH WEDNESDAY. Ashes will be distributed at all the Masses. The Mass Schedule is as follows:

0615 - WH5300
1205 - Chapel
1700 - Chapel
1900 - Chapel

LENTEN FAST AND ABSTINENCE

As a sign of seriousness, Catholics are asked to FAST during Lent and to abstain from meat at certain times.

FASTING means "one full meal and two small ones", at a minimum.

ABSTINENCE means "no meat or poultry".

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of both fasting and abstinence.

Every Friday in Lent is a day of abstinence (in memory of the Lord's passion and death).

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Beginning next Friday (15th) at 1800, there will be the Ceremony of the Stations of the Cross every Friday evening at the Chapel. It will be followed each week by a simple supper of soup to keep the spirit of fasting.

DID YOU KNOW?

LENT:

Well, here it is again...just when you thought you were safe.

The annual forty-day period when the Church asks us to GET SERIOUS.

The ASHES on Ash Wednesday are supposed to be a BEGINNING.

Why FORTY DAYS?

Because important events in the Bible are usually described as lasting for "forty days": Noah in the ark (Genesis 6-9); Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18); the tribes of Israel in the desert for forty YEARS (Deuteronomy 2:7); Jesus' time of trial in the desert (Matthew 4).

"Forty" denotes a "lengthy period of time".

Why ASHES?

Because in ancient times, ASHES always signified "personal sorrow and repentance". Before the days of Personal Confession in the Catholic Church, a sinner's penance was public, and he or she might have to stand at the door of the church for FORTY days, dressed in rough clothing and sprinkled with ASHES. Then at Easter, he or she would be received back into communion with the Church.

For us, ASHES can signify that we're serious about entering into this time of personal preparation for the Great Holydays of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

What about FASTING?

Well, in the Early Church, they relied heavily on FASTING as an expression of their religious seriousness. As a matter of fact, from AD 400 to 800 or so, only one meal each day - usually in the evening - was permitted, and this meal couldn't include flesh-meat, fish, alcohol or even eggs or milk products. Sundays didn't count, of course; they were always celebrated as "Little Easters".

What about ALMSGIVING?

It means "giving money to the poor", and the early Christians used to take the money they saved on groceries and give it to the poor.

Modern Lenten practices certainly encourage this type of "negative penance" (giving something up), but it also encourages "positive penance" (doing extra good deeds and increasing one's spiritual practices).

Best advice I ever heard on the matter came from a Seminary professor I used to know. He said: "In Lent, it's not necessary to invent penances for yourself. The best thing is simply to do your ordinary tasks in an extraordinary way".

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...CDT Anthony Miller who died last Friday...and his family...and all who grieve for him.

...all those traveling to RMC this weekend...that their travel may be safe.

...all our military brothers and sisters - and their families - throughout the world.

...all those who have been killed in the conflict in Afghanistan...and their families.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, here's a question for you for CHURCH STUFF...Is there a biblical case for Apostolic Succession? Just something I've been thinking and reading about lately.

A: OK, I can do that.

The term "apostolic succession" refers to the Catholic belief that bishops are the spiritual successors of the Apostles and have the same responsibility that Scripture gives to the original Apostles of Jesus...specifically, the possession of the teaching authority.

So, we believe that together with the Pope (whom we believe to be the successor of Peter), the bishops have the mission of being pastors who continue the work of Christ as teachers and shepherds.

Early on in the history of the Church, the early believers were subjected to disputes and misunderstandings about what to believe, and different groups began teaching their own interpretations about what Jesus taught.

In trying to decide what was true or not, those early believers didn't take a vote.

Instead, they turned to the teachings of those who had known Jesus...namely, the Apostles...to see what the "real" interpretations were, so that they could preserve Jesus' authentic teachings.

So, the Apostles were the original teachers, and as they were killed off, that responsibility was passed to those who had been taught by them...who became "overseers" of the individual churches. The word for "overseer" in Greek was "episkopos"...and it's from that word that we get the word "bishop". These elders were consecrated by the "laying on" of hands and by prayer, and they received the responsibility to preserve the teachings of the Apostles.

This view was in place in the Church pretty early, as the following quote from St. Ignatius of Antioch (himself a bishop around 110 AD) shows. Writing to a group

of believers, he said:

You must all follow the bishops,
as Jesus Christ follows the Father...
Let no one do anything of concern
to the Church without the bishop...

(Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8,1)

And eventually, amid the confusion of the early persecutions, that was how the Church organized itself.

You asked for Scriptural basis, and I can do that. Of course, the Bible isn't a textbook...so you can't just look in the index and get a neat paragraph for any and all questions. You have to look at the texts and draw out the picture of what was going on...but I think I can provide you with the picture.

First, the responsibilities of the Apostles:

(After the Resurrection), the eleven disciples went
to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had
ordered them...Then Jesus approached and said:
"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit, TEACHING them to observe all
that I have commanded you...

Matthew 28:16-19

So the Apostles are given the task of teaching...and when a need arose early on about their task, they were quick to preserve that original responsibility and to appoint others to do other things in the Church structure. If you read Acts 6, you can see the Apostles setting up a method to take care of distribution of food among the poor, so that they wouldn't have to abandon their own task of TEACHING.

They instructed the Jerusalem church to choose seven men (we call them "deacons"), who would take care of the food problem, so that they (the Apostles) could devote themselves to their original responsibility:

The Twelve said: "It is not right for us to neglect
the word of God to serve at table...Select from
among you seven reputable men...whom we shall
appoint to this task...whereas we shall devote ourselves
to prayer and to the ministry of the word."...
And they chose (the seven men) and presented these men
to the Apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them...

Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7.

The Apostles were responsible for this early structure, and as they died off, their own job was passed on to others whom they chose.

For example, St. Paul (who was considered an "apostle", although not a member of the original Twelve) wrote to a young friend named Titus and described the characteristics that he considered necessary for someone to hold the office of "episkopos" ("overseer" or "bishop"):

As God's steward, a bishop must be blameless...

hospitable, temperate, just holy and self-controlled,
HOLDING FAST TO THE TRUE MESSAGE AS TAUGHT
so that he may be able both to exhort with sound doctrine
and to refute opponents.

Titus 1:5-9.

And if you read Paul's two Letters to Timothy, you can see Paul talking to Timothy not just as a young friend but as someone whom Paul has put in charge of the Church at Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey). The Catholic belief is that Paul appointed Timothy as "overseer" ("bishop") of Ephesus:

Do not neglect the gift you have, which was
conferred on you through the prophetic word
and with the imposition of hands...

I Timothy 4:14

And in Chapter 3 of I Timothy, Paul also describes for Timothy what kind of person should be a "bishop", just as he did for Titus.

In II Timothy, he writes again:

...I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God
that you have through the imposition of my hands...
Take as your norm the sound words that you heard
from me...

II Timothy 1:6-14.

So by the time you get to St. Ignatius in AD 110 (quoted above), there was a pretty formal structure in place in the Church which had the following characteristics:

- a) Each Christian community had a teaching authority, originally an Apostle but after their deaths "elders" or "overseers" (bishops), whose duty it was to guard against false teaching, to preserve the message of Jesus intact and to pass on the heritage that the original Apostles had taught.
- b) These "bishops" were installed with a ceremony of prayer and "laying-on" of hands (the gesture of "laying-on" of hands was inherited from the Old Testament, where it signified a "passing on of authority" - see Numbers 27:18-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9).
- c) And as time went on - and disputes emerged - the bishops would gather as a body to decide whether or not the original belief was being preserved. These meetings, of course, are called "Church Councils".

And that's the short version.

If you had the time and the inclination, you could pursue the specifics of this picture, both from Scripture and from other letters that were written at the time that didn't make it into the New Testament..

But the basic Catholic belief is that the office of "bishop" does indeed date from the earliest times in the Church and the New Testament, that its responsibilities were

passed on through prayer and the "laying-on of hands" of the early Apostles, and that this office in the Church has continued for 2000 years.

Since you didn't ask about the role of the Pope as the successor of Peter, I won't get into it, but at least you have the basic picture of the structure that the earliest Church understood to be necessary to preserve the teachings of Jesus whole and entire... and to pass them on to the Church in every age.

Quoting the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s), the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" sums it up in these words:

...The bishops have by divine institution
taken the place of the Apostles as pastors of the Church,
in such wise that whoever listens to them
is listening to Christ...

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THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

SACRAMENTS:

Catholics are a "sacrament" people.

This is certainly no secret, but over the years, it's been misunderstood a lot.

Catholics have always depended on the use of THINGS, of PLACES, and of PERSONS to touch divine presence and to be touched by it.

It's really that Catholics are a people of POETRY.

The rituals of the Catholic Faith become vehicles of GOD'S LIFE (which we call GRACE).

God and humanity encounter each other through CREATED things: simple water, bread and wine, human words, oil...and so forth.

But the operative principle is, of course, FAITH.

Without FAITH, words remain words, water remains water, bread remains bread and wine becomes wine.

With FAITH, we step beyond the senses into the MYSTERY-dimension: words of Scripture become DIVINE communication; waters of Baptism become a DIVINE moment of new birth; and bread-and-wine become a Communion with the DIVINE.

We believe that Jesus was no stranger to this idea. He was Jewish, after all, and the Jewish tradition celebrated its relationship with God in springtime rituals, Passover, cyclic feasts, holy places, incense, sacrifices and sacred meals.

And Jesus too used water and bread-and-wine and fish and, at one point, even saliva (see John's story about him curing a blind man - Chapter 9) to communicate God's Presence.

And that's what a SACRAMENT is: the communication of God's Presence through the simple things of everyday life.

The early Christians understood this. They learned about conversion, death and resurrection by going down into the water, being anointed with sweet-smelling oil, by dressing in new white robes at their Baptism.

They continued this understanding through the touch of the community's hands at what we Catholics now call "Confirmation".

They remembered Jesus and developed their relationship with him as they sat weekly at table with him, sharing the holy Bread and Cup.

Their own persecution-death-victory dramas were understood in the light of his.

They called these events by the Greek name "mysteria" - "the mysteries". In Latin, the word became "sacramenta" - "holy signs" - and in them, they saw God and humanity coming together in a saving experience.

In those days, they didn't speak of only "seven" sacraments. Indeed, for them, any ritual that celebrated a divine SAVING action was a "sacrament" - like the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday.

By the 1220s, however, the Church limited the number of formal major events to seven and spoke of the "Seven Sacraments". Other lesser and more infrequent events were known as "sacramentals". These would include such things as the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, wearing a religious medal, hanging a crucifix on the wall of a house, etc.

But the seven major experiences of God's Presence were always considered the CENTER of the Church's "faith experience", and they have come down to us as the "Seven Sacraments" - Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Marriage, Orders and the Anointing of the Sick. They're "major" because they focus on the "major" times and events in life: birth, growth, nourishment, saying "I'm sorry", marriage, service to God's people and sickness-and-death.

This is the Catholic "sacramental system", and we believe that in these events, God comes CLOSEST to us human beings, descending into our humanity and lifting us up to his life.

That what Catholicism is all about.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"One measure of LEADERSHIP
is the caliber of the people
who choose to follow you."

Unattributed

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

That's all for now.

Hope you can get some rest this weekend.

And don't forget to pray...

Woodie